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Democrats wary of Japan entering trade talks

BY BY JIM ABRAMS

WASHINGTON (AP) — Concerned that Japan’s possible participation in ongoing trade talks among Pacific nations threatens the U.S. auto industry, Congressional Democrats raised their worries in a letter to President Barack Obama on Thursday.

At least three dozen House and Senate Democrats said Japan has a long history of erecting barriers against U.S. auto imports and resisting U.S. efforts to create a more level playing field, and that is unlikely to change if Japan joins the 11-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP, negotiations aimed at establishing free trade principles.

Instead, they wrote, Japanese auto exports to the United States could increase if the United States eliminates its current 2.5 percent car tariffs and 25 percent truck tariffs.

“These longstanding economically harmful practices are not susceptible to cursory negotiations at this stage, three years into the U.S. involvement in the TPP negotiations and close to the administration’s target date” for concluding the TPP talks, they wrote.

The administration has said it hopes to wrap up the negotiations by the end of this year. Last month, during a visit to Washington, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe signed a joint statement with Obama saying they would continue talks on Japan’s “possible interest” in joining the TPP talks.

Among those signing the letter was Rep. Sander Levin of Michigan, top Democrat and champion of the auto industry on the Ways and Means Committee, which oversees trade issues.

In the letter, the Democrats wrote that Japan now exports 120 automobiles to the United States for every U.S. auto exported to Japan. They also wrote that the two countries will remain close and important allies but “a flawed, one-way trade agreement that benefits Japan at the expense of the United States businesses and workers will not help strengthen this vital relationship.”